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SUBJECT: KAMERHE, KENGO STRESS STATE AUTHORITY AND REFORM AT OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

¶1. Summary: National security, judicial reform, and the lack of fundamental services such as water and electricity were key themes presented at Parliament's March 15 opening ceremonies by the leaders of its two houses. National Assembly President Kamerhe cited recent violence in Bas-Congo as an unacceptable challenge to state authority. Senate President Kengo focused on social issues and economic and educational opportunity. Both made appeals to legislators and Congolese society to set aside differences in order to move forward with reform. End summary.

¶2. National Assembly President Vital Kamerhe and Senate President Leon Kengo Wa Dondo framed the legislative agenda for the Congolese Parliament's Spring 2008 session in their addresses to fellow legislators, government officials and foreign diplomats March 15. Kamerhe interwove continuing legislative priorities with current events, including the Goma peace conference and violence in Bas-Congo. Kengo spoke in more general terms, addressing themes of security, social services, economy, health and education.

Kamerhe

¶3. Kamerhe reviewed the Fall 2007 regular and December 2007-January 2008 special sessions, highlighting legislation adopted and the activities of special Assembly commissions. He summarized the present session's agenda, which includes establishing judicial oversight bodies and restructuring the court system, creating sub-provincial jurisdictions to decentralize state authority, and standing up the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) as the successor to the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI).

¶4. Kamerhe committed the second half of his address to events of the January-March 2008 intersessional period. He reviewed at length the Goma peace conference and resulting Acte d'Engagement, violence in Bas-Congo province, earthquakes in North and South Kivu, and threats to a government minister in Lubumbashi by supporters of a political rival.

¶5. Kamerhe used the events to emphasize resolving conflicts through negotiation, rather than violence, and the fundamental importance of state authority. He cited violence in Bas-Congo, where police forces and militants of the politico-religious movement Bundu dia Kongo (BDK) clashed repeatedly since late February, and an incident in Lubumbashi where Land Affairs Minister Edouard Kabu Kapwa was effectively made a prisoner in his own hotel by supporters of a political rival, as threats to state authority. His warning to National Assembly Deputy and BDK leader Ne Muanda Nsemi to cease inciting his followers to violence drew strong reactions of support from the assembled deputies.

¶6. Kamerhe called on the government to provide all possible assistance to communities affected by the February 3 earthquake in

North and South Kivu and subsequent aftershocks. He praised the appointment of Abbe Apollinaire Malumalu as national coordinator for the "Amani" peace, security, stabilization, and development program for the Kivu provinces. He evoked the success of President Kabila in leading the DRC out of violence through diplomacy as a model for the program.

¶17. Kamerhe encouraged the Assembly to work together to find solutions to the question of revenue sharing between the provincial and national governments, and noted the importance of customs reforms initiated by the government to increasing revenues. He praised adoption of the \$3 billion 2008 DRC budget, while acknowledging that at current levels it remains insufficient to address the persistent national problem of poverty.

Kengo

¶18. Senate president Leon Kengo Wa Dondo's speech focused in more general terms on national security, the economy, government reform, education and health. His sharpest commentary came on security issues. He criticized the government's inability to secure the eastern DRC from armed groups and from incursions by Mbororo tribesman into Orientale. He acknowledged the potential of the Goma Acte d'Engagement and lauded the role of the international community in facilitating the agreement.

¶19. Kengo dedicated a third of his speech to social concerns, such as the provision of water, electricity, health care and education. He pointed out that the Congolese people lacked sufficient electricity and potable water despite the DRC's abundant natural resources, including hydroelectric potential. He highlighted the flight of intellectual capital and called for reform of the educational system. Kengo addressed the problem of violence against women,

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emphasizing that all women in Congo -- not only those in the eastern conflict areas -- should have access to adequate health care, especially victims of sexual violence.

¶10. Kengo briefly listed draft laws before the Senate. He noted that the pace of judicial reform will be determined by legislation establishing the High Council of Magistrates and the new court system. He called for an approach of "open arms" rather than "closed fists" to overcome legislative challenges, and made a broad call for unity of effort despite provincial differences in order to stimulate government action on reform.

Comment

¶11. The challenges before the National Assembly and Senate will require the high level of cooperation called for by Kamerhe and Kengo. Critical legislation such as decentralization and judicial reform will be even more difficult to achieve as unscheduled proceedings, such as the March 27-29 questioning of Interior Minister Denis Kalume and BDK leader Ne Muanda Nsemi on the events in Bas-Congo, are added to the agenda. End comment.

GARVELINK